



In the beginning of the narrative of chapter 6 however, the doors have not yet been set in place, although all of the breaches in the wall have been closed and it was entirely rebuilt. For the opponents of the project, here chiefly represented by the Samaritan, Ammonite and Arab leaders, their time was running out and they needed to hatch a successful plot against Nehemiah quickly. They are likely becoming desperate at this point.

Sanballat and Geshem's first plot is an assassination attempt. Using the ruse of diplomacy they seek to lure Nehemiah out of the relative safety of Jerusalem to a town nearer the border of Samaria, presumably hoping that if they kill Nehemiah the rest of the Jews will abandon the remaining rebuilding of the wall out of fear. Without their courageous and resourceful governor they will lack the confidence to complete the project.

They would also lose the powerful advantage of Nehemiah's good favour with the king. Nehemiah recognises what they are planning but he does not betray that fact in his response, even though it is likely that both parties knew that the other party knew what was going on. Nehemiah declared that he was undertaking a great work and couldn't afford to abandon it before it was completed.

Of course that is exactly what they were hoping for him to do. They persisted sending him the same request four times with Nehemiah always responding in the same manner. The fifth time Sanballat sent to Nehemiah he made a more public accusation which he presumably intended to spread as a dangerous rumour.

The letter was an open one which the official was presumably supposed to read and communicate to other parties beyond Nehemiah himself. The letter's claim is that it was widely reported that Nehemiah was planning to rebel with the rest of the Jews and that this was the real cause for the urgency of the wall rebuilding effort. One could imagine that this would greatly concern Nehemiah.

Such a false claim had already successfully halted the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls back in Ezra chapter 4. Should Artaxerxes be persuaded by such a case again, Nehemiah and the Jews would be in trouble. Nehemiah of course has the great advantage of being well known by and in favour with the king. Nevertheless a widespread rumour confirmed by several witnesses would be a very dangerous thing.

Sanballat suggests that Nehemiah needs to act immediately and comply with his request lest news of the rumour get back to Artaxerxes. Sanballat's intent presumably is to intimidate Nehemiah into meeting up with him. Nehemiah however is not intimidated.

He is assured that he has the king's confidence and that Artaxerxes won't credit such baseless rumours concerning him so he calls Sanballat's bluff. Recognising the cunning of his adversaries and their desperate desire to divert him from the task, he appeals to

the lord for renewed strength in his labours. The second ruse of the adversaries is even more cunning, involving a supposed friendly figure, Shemaiah the prophet and other false prophets.

Shemaiah is confined to his house for some reason, about which we can only speculate. Perhaps it was a false prophetic sign with Shemaiah's confinement in his house, representing the confinement that Nehemiah must seek in the temple. It may have been the result of ritual impurity, although this wouldn't seem to square with Shemaiah's suggestion that they go to the temple together.

Maybe Shemaiah wanted to present himself as fearing assassination. Sanballat and Tavaiah had intended to assassinate Nehemiah and by this point they presumably knew that he knew. Consequently their next plot was designed to use that fact against him.

They intended to incite him through false prophecy and fear to violate the holiness of the sanctuary by taking refuge within it as a layman. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 26 King Uzziah had been struck with lifelong leprosy by the lord for seeking to enter the lord's house in an unlawful manner. Nehemiah, knowing that the lord would not prophetically command him to act against his law in such a manner, recognises that Shemaiah is a false prophet in the pay of Tavaiah and Sanballat.

Had he listened the effect could have been catastrophic. Nehemiah would have allowed his fear to lead him to break the law of the lord. This would have put him at odds with the very god who was strengthening his hand as the leader of the Jews.

His reputation among the people would have been ruined as they saw him violate the law of god out of fear. His cowardice would likely have proved contagious, especially because his courage and determination had been so contagious to this point. And, on top of everything else, by confining himself within the temple Nehemiah would have put himself out of commission for the rebuilding work leaving it leaderless and rudderless.

Shemaiah was not the only false prophet in the employ of Sanballat and Tavaiah. Noadiah and several others added their voices to his. Once again, as he does elsewhere, Nehemiah commits judgement and justice in these matters to the lord.

He does not seek vengeance himself, even though he has plenty of power to wield, but entrusts the judgement of his enemies to the lord. The work on the wall was finally finished after 52 days. Andrew Steinman reckons that the date of the completion was August 12th 445 BC.

This might seem surprisingly quick, but we should appreciate that much of the original walls of Jerusalem from its last days prior to its overthrow by Nebuchadnezzar likely remained, albeit in a ruined state. Other parts had already been largely rebuilt earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes in the work described in Ezra chapter 4. The rebuilding of the wall

was mostly a task of addressing almost 140 years worth of neglect in some parts, alongside the completion of rebuilding efforts from earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, restoring ruins in some other parts, while building a few parts from the ground up. The wall was not being built from scratch.

The enemies of the Jews had been attempting to sap their determination and courage and to bring them to abandon their work out of fear. However, as Nehemiah and the people persevered and completed the work, their success caused the nations themselves to fear, recognising that they were losing the dominance that they had formerly enjoyed and that Judah was rising again within the region. They also, most importantly, saw that God was with the Jews.

Tobiah the Ammonite had tentacles throughout the Judahite nobility on account of his familial connections and shrewd alignments. Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely one of the priests and is mentioned in the account of the building of the wall. Tobiah's influence meant that he could create resistance to Nehemiah from within Judah itself.

Indeed, Tobiah was far more connected with the class of Judah's nobility than Nehemiah himself was. Nehemiah would consequently frequently hear the voice of Tobiah coming from the lips of those around him. A question to consider.

Much of this chapter concerns deceptive words that need to be seen through. The ruses of Sambalat and Geshem, the false prophecy of Shemaiah and the words of the Jewish nobility who had been influenced by Tobiah. What are some of the principles by which a faithful man like Nehemiah could test the truth of the words that he heard? John chapter 4 verses 27 to 54.

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, What do you seek? or Why are you talking with her? So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ? They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, Rabbi, eat. But he said to them, I have food to eat that you do not know about. So the disciples said to one another, Has anyone brought him something to eat? Jesus said to them, My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.

Do you not say, There are yet four months, then comes the harvest? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, One sows and another reaps.

I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have

entered into their labour. Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.

He told me all that I ever did. So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

They said to the woman, It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world. After the two days he departed for Galilee, for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his own hometown. So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast.

So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

So Jesus said to him, Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe. The official said to him, Sir, come down before my child dies. Jesus said to him, Go, your son will live.

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, Yesterday, at the seventh hour the fever left him.

The father knew that that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, Your son will live. And he himself believed and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

In John chapter 4 verse 27 we continue the narrative of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, just after he had declared himself to be the Messiah. At this point his disciples return and are surprised to see him in conversation with this woman. J. Ramsey Michaels suggests that the, what do you seek question, might be designed to recall Jesus' earlier statement about the father's seeking of people to worship him in spirit and truth in verse 23.

We've already seen that Jews did not have dealings with, or perhaps shared drinking vessels with, Samaritans, a matter that had already provoked a question from the woman herself. Jesus seems to be contravening some of the conventions that would typically have governed the relations between Jews and Samaritans. Besides this, the Samaritan woman is seemingly alone in the middle of the day getting water, and a Jewish man is asking to drink of some of her water.

Besides going against certain Jewish principles of ritual purity, it likely also violated certain cultural bounds of propriety. A man talking to an unrelated woman in a public space without any other people around might lead to questions, and Jewish society tended to treat such interactions with great caution. While the disciples don't seem to be offended, they are quite surprised by the fact that Jesus is doing this, and the narrator wants us to know that, although they might have wanted to ask what Jesus was seeking, and what they were talking about, they did not do so.

Jesus' contravening of cultural norms here may be a significant part of the story. This is a case that Jerome Nere has argued. In our modern society, which tends to valorise transgression, such contraventions are often taken as straightforward dismissals of various cultural taboos, norms or expectations, and the concerns or impulses that produce them.

But something more subtle and interesting may be going on in this case. To appreciate this, we will need to pay more attention to the details of the story, in terms of its cultural background. In his treatment of this passage, Nere begins by reminding us that the worlds Jesus and the Samaritan woman inhabited were divided by gender, the private indoors domestic sphere of kinship circles being a more female realm, concerned to avoid shame, and the public open air realm being a realm of male pursuit of honour.

Clothing and behaviour, perhaps especially in respect to speech, would maintain and reinforce this distinction. The Samaritan woman at the well, Nere observes, is there alone at midday, an unusual time for a woman to be at the well. One would usually expect the women to come to the well together in the morning and the evening.

This has led a number of commentators to speculate that she was socially marginalised on account of her history. Then she is speaking with a strange man in a public place with no other persons present, and he is a Jewish man at that. In addition, he intentionally revealed in conversation that she had five husbands, and that she was currently in a relationship with a man who was not her husband.

This does not seem to be a woman of respectable character and firm social standing, but an unrelated man talking with her about such matters would seem to exacerbate the issue. Jesus sends the woman to call her husband and come back, and in verses 28-29 she performs a similar act as she leaves her water jar, goes into the town and summons the people. In summoning them she declares the fact that Jesus had told her all that she ever did, presumably referring to her having five husbands and a man not her husband.

Her telling of others is reminiscent both of earlier stories of women at wells in scripture, where the women hurried to tell their families, and also of the initial disciples passing on the news of Jesus to their friends and relatives in chapter 1. The Samaritan woman is an outsider in several respects. She is a Samaritan, she is a woman, and what's more she is a seemingly shameless or shamed woman, marginalised within her own society. In

speaking as he does with her, Jesus temporarily violates cultural expectations, norms and boundaries.

However, as Nere argues, the woman who was isolated at the beginning of the narrative is at the centre of a new inside group by the end of it, a company of Samaritan disciples of Jesus, who initially believed through her informal testimony, but later came to believe more fully because of Jesus' own word. At the end they ask Jesus to stay with them, to bring him into the circle of their own community. Jesus initially violates social boundaries.

However, he does this not simply to transgress society, but to transform and restore society. The marital themes evoked by meeting a woman at a well might also be significant here. The unknown persons who are summoned by the woman are destined to become family.

We should probably consider the similarities and the contrasts between the private and night-time conversation with Nicodemus, the highly honoured male teacher of the Jews in chapter 3, and the open-air conversation with the shamed Samaritan woman in chapter 4. Both accounts contain key elements of misunderstanding that drive the conversation, but the persons with whom Jesus speaks are at opposite ends of the cultural and social hierarchy. Although we later see Nicodemus playing the part of a secret believer, Jesus' conversation with him produces far less obvious fruit than the conversation with the socially marginalised Samaritan woman. While the woman went into the town to call people to see Jesus, the disciples asked Jesus whether he had anything to eat, inviting him to take some food.

Their misunderstanding concerning the food that Jesus speaks of parallels the woman's misunderstanding concerning the water he spoke of earlier. Jesus says that his food is to do the will of him who sent him and to accomplish his work. Perhaps we might see some reference back to the story of the temptation in the wilderness here, particularly the first temptation.

John does not record the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, as the synoptics do, but at this point and then a few moments later in this text there are allusions back to details of that account and what follows it. Before the woman returns, Jesus mentions the conventional belief that there are four months and then the harvest comes. One typically has to wait for some time before harvesting one's crop.

You sow but you will have to wait some time before you will reap. However, the harvest is about to appear almost instantaneously. The seed sown in the heart of the Samaritan woman is about to yield an immediate and bountiful crop of believers among the Samaritans.

This might recall the prophecy of Amos 9.13 which describes a similar situation. Behold,

the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes, him who sows the seed. The mountain shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it.

While John and the prophets that preceded him sowed seed in tears and expended great labour and suffering to sow that seed, Christ and his mission were seeing fruitfulness from the very outset. It was important that the disciples recognised that they were entering into the labours of others who had gone ahead of them, enjoying the fruit of their work. After a short stay with the Samaritans, Jesus returns to his primary base of operations in Galilee.

The evangelist mentions in passing that he has testified that a prophet has no honour in his own hometown, a statement he made in his sermon in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. When he comes to Galilee, he is welcomed however by the Galileans who had seen all that he did in the feast. He then goes to Cana, the same place where he had made water wine, performing a second sign at Capernaum. In the first half of John's gospel there are seven key signs that Jesus performs, seven being a number associated with creation and Sabbath.

This sign is numbered as the second sign in verse 54. There is a royal official in Capernaum, presumably a Herodian, whose son is ill and who asks Jesus to come down and heal him. One can imagine that such a person, although in many ways at the opposite end of the social hierarchy as the Samaritan woman, might be unpopular among many of the Jews.

Jesus responds by claiming that unless the people see signs and wonders they will not believe. They are looking for some dramatic display of power and yet when Jesus actually gives a sign, he takes the form of something very understated. Jesus performs signs but they are hidden and a warning against a dependence upon spectacle.

Jesus does not give some dramatic pyrotechnic work of wonder, rather he gives a simple word, go your son will live. He doesn't even go to the man's house, he doesn't perform some great act of wizardry or an elaborate ritual. He just gives the man the instruction and the man believes the word and goes his way.

Rather than great wonders, Jesus gives people his words and as they believe those words, great wonders follow. Another important thing to observe here is how simple the responses to Jesus in the gospel are. His instructions tend to be very basic things.

Draw some water from the jars, go home, take up your bed and walk, have the people sit down, go wash in the pool of Siloam, and in several of these cases Jesus isn't even present when the wonder happens. The power of his word holds nonetheless. There are similarities between this sign and the first one.



In both cases Jesus is asked to do something, gives a seemingly discouraging response to the person who requests, but the person persists in their request and then receives what they ask for. As in the synoptic gospels we see here the importance of persistence in prayer. The emphasis upon trust in Jesus' word is also the same.

Likewise the issue of knowing and not knowing in a conversation between a master and his servants. In this case it is the master who knows what has happened and the servants who don't. Both miracles are followed by a conversation that seems to play an important role in displaying the character of the miracle as a sign.

In both cases people believe in response. The reference to the two days in the preceding verses might also present this episode as another third day resurrection style event. The hour of the son's healing is the seventh hour.

Jesus' meeting with the woman was in the sixth hour and there he spoke of the coming hour. The seventh hour might relate to that. A question to consider.

Throughout the gospel of John there are people who function as paradigms of response to Christ and of faith or unbelief. How might the Samaritan woman function as a paradigm of Christian faith and witness?